

THE ROMANCE OF *Violin* MAKING



*John Gould, who will play one of the Smith instruments in concerts planned for March, tunes up in the Mitchell labs.
Photo: Dragi Markovic*

'The fascination of violin construction is endless – it attracts people of all ages and from all walks of life. The young amateur with all the confidence of youth; the scientist who wishes to solve problems of acoustics; chemists who seek to discover the ingredients of the old Italian varnishes; and professional makers who have given the best part of their lives to the subject. It contains problems that are never completely solved, yet withal it can be said the Art is a long way ahead of the Science.'

Arthur E Smith, 1934

Arthur E Smith, one of the best violin-makers of the 20th century, was born in England in 1880. His fascination with violin-making began with his dissatisfaction with his own cheap violin. This prompted him to make one, and his hobby gradually turned into a life-long obsession. In his twenties he tossed aside a safe and secure career as an engineer and joined an antique and musical instruments firm. The agreement: he would do their repair works for half the time, and spend the other half making his own instruments. The reputation of young Smith as a repairer, restorer and maker grew rapidly. However, Smith believed established English companies, such as the Hills brothers, left him very little room for expansion.

In 1909, he invested all his savings in a single-trip ticket and sets of fine European timber, and sailed to Australia with the intention of establishing a new company. He first arrived in Melbourne and set up a small business repairing and restoring instruments. Unfortunately he found the Melbourne weather unsuitable for his craft, and soon left for San Francisco. However, a year later he returned to Australia, this time settling in Sydney, where he set up shop at 68 Hunter Street.

Smith enthusiastically experimented and improved his craft. He greatly admired Australian timbers but never found any equal to the tonal qualities of his traditional European pieces. He experimented with Australian wood for bows, hoping to find one to equal Pernambuco wood, used in fine bows throughout the world. Most violin-makers believe the Cremonese in Italy produce

the best varnish; its recipe still remains a mystery. AE Smith experimented with varnish, using simple and natural ingredients available to the Cremonese. He produced hundreds of varnishes and discarded many. He finally devised a beautiful and lasting one, which remains a family secret.

Another of Smith's contributions to Australian music was his effort to ensure the supply of strings during the Second World War. When a German consignment of strings and violin fittings was disrupted, Smith designed a string-making machine. He eventually set up a string factory after the war.

Despite the traditional pre-eminence of Italian violins, AE Smith made Australian violins known internationally. During his lifetime, he made about 210 instruments. He was the first Australian elected to the International Society of Violin and Bow Makers, and was awarded a Diploma of Honour for his violin and viola in the 1949 International Exhibition of Violin Makers in the Hague. His work has been revered by violinists such as Isaac Stern and Yehudi Menuhin, and his violins have found homes around the world.

AE Smith passed away in 1978 at the age of 98. Before his death, Smith's string quartet – a viola, cello and two violins – was acquired for the Museum's National Historical Collection. It is not only a representation of Smith's craftsmanship, but also a symbol of his search for perfection and his passion for his art.

Pradiipa Khor, a student of Art History and Curatorship at ANU, was an intern at the Museum for part of 2003

A series of Museum concerts featuring the Smith instruments is planned for March next year and AE Smith's story will be displayed in the Eternity gallery from May.